WHY PRAY IN ARABIC

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WHY SHOULD WE PRAY IN ARABIC

The question some times is asked as to why should a Muslim pray only in Arabic language and not his mother tongue.

It may first seem logical that every Muslim should pray through his own mother language, so that he may understand what he say; but a little more thinking and study, we shall find that there are strong arguments in favour of only one common language and that also Arabic.

ARABIC: A DEEP AND VAST LANGUAGE

It is a fact recognized by the linguists that the Arabic language has the best ability to express wide and deep thoughts and to explain important subjects in short and precise words. Morever, it has been proved that no language, except Arabic, is capable of presenting such deep spiritual, moral and ethical expressions in such an eloquent manner. Therefore the choice of Arabic for Islamic prayers is not to be wondered upon.

Wakche Aglari, an Italian orientalist in the University of Naples, writes in her book on Advancement of Islam, that in no literary work of the world can there be found such deep-meaning sentences with such beautiful words except in the Qur'an; and that depth of meaning is crowned with such eloquent language.

The late George Bernard Shaw, in the course of his discussion on Islam at Mombasa during 1943 said: “I also very much admire the forcible and striking diction of the Qur'an. What grace and beauty characterizes that passage which depicts the dreadful scene of the dooms-day field, and dealing with infacticide, dramatically leaves off at the question, 'For what crime wert thou slain?' to the innocent child that was buried alive or put to death. In my opinion it is the most effective way of creating an abiding impression on the minds of people.” (He was reffering to the opening ayats of the Sura 81)

Professor Arbury, the well known orientalist scholar (University of Cambridge), says that no language has and shall have the ability to put in a short sentence, the word من (Min) (which is repeated five times in an ayat of the Qur'an) without disturbing the eloquence and conveyance of its meaning, except the language (Arabic) which is chosen for the Qur'an to convey the message of Islam.

A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR THE ISLAMIC PRAYER

All Muslims perform their religious rites and worship of God, including the daily five time prayers, in Arabic. In the course of these prayers, some verses of the Qur'an and other sentences, are uttered so as to express the Greatness and Glory of Allah, the Creator, and the humbleness and insignificance of the human beings, the creatures.

This is done in the same wordings by all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, even by those who do not understand Arabic. This system of prayers in one common language was in practise during the life time of the Prophet of Islam and has continued after him for more than 1400 years. In every country, Muslims have been praying in Arabic language.

CEMENTING THE ISLAMIC BROTHERHOOD

Prayer in Arabic cements the Islamic brotherhood and emphasizes the universal character of Islam. Islam has come for the untire Human race. It is a fact that the Muslim Communities of the world, like all other communities, speak numerous languages and dialects. At the same time it should be appreciated that our life today is rapidly assuming international character. Distance between any two points of the world has shrinked fantastically. In every place you will find Muslims speaking different languages. Imagine a Muslim who is an Englishman going to China and passing through a street. Suddenly he hears the voice of, say 'CHING-CHANG-CHUNG' which, let us suppose mean 'Allaho Akbar' – God is Great.

No doubt the stranger would not understand that it is a call for Muslim prayer and would miss the opportunity of praying in congregation with the people of that locality. Incidentally, the mosques in China do not resemble in appearance to those in Europe or other Eastern countries and are without minarets. Conversely, if a Chinese travels abroad where people pray in their local language, he would not be able to understand it and participate in it.

S.Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, Chief Missionary of Bilal Muslim Mision, writes:-

“Prayers in Arabic are an important factor cementing the solidity and unity of Muslims all over the world. Nowadays if a Muslim from Czekoslovakia enters a mosque in the interior of Congo, he finds himself at home and participates in the prayer without any hint of bewilderness. What will happen if every man is told to pray in his own language? Can this feeling of Unity and Oneness survive?”

Thus, Islam, the universal religion, has paved the way of common approach to God, has united its followers and instilled in them a feeling of everlasting Brotherhood.

One cannot ignore the racial, colour, or national prejudices which are rife these days almost in every country, Islam has not only condemned all sorts of discrimination but has shown the practical way of fostering fraternity and brotherhood. A common language for religious services plays a great part in bringing people close to one another and create a feeling of equality in the eyes of God.

QURAN: WORK OF ALLAH

Arabic in which the holy Quran and traditions of the Prophet have been revealed has a special status and honour. This high status of Arabic is not due to its being the language of the Arabs; rather it is because of its being language of Qur'an chosen by Almighty God for conveying His last message and revelation.

Muslims believe that the holy Quran is the Word of God. As such, it is only befitting that the recitation of the word of God is done in the same form and language in which it was originally pronounced. Spiritually, a faithful Muslim finds himself ascending higher and higher with the support of the words of God as expressed in the original language which is Arabic.

TRANSLATION ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE

Any translation of the original will not be the word of God but the work of human beings. Keep in view the imperfect human knowledge, and remember that Arabic is the widest and richest of all languages. Then you will have to admit that no translation of the Quran would be perfect enough to carry the true meanings and to fulfil the spiritual purposes.

S. Saeed Akhtar Rizvi writes on this subject:—

"Praying in English: First of all, translation of any work of literature from any language into another is considered by all men of literature as almost impossible. Of course, you will find thousands of translations of literary works, but they represent only the body of the original; the spirit is always lost.

Secondly, Arabic language, in particular, is so comprehensive that, for example, it is just impossible to convey the complete idea of a word (let alone a 'sentence') into English. Take for example, the most common phrase اَلْحَمْدُ لله which is generally translated as "All praise be to God." Now ال conveys in Arabic the following shades of meaning:

1. Each and every individual of the thing mentioned, taken separately;

2. All the individuals of the thing mentioned taken jointly;

3. The species of the thing mentioned taken as an abstract idea etc.

Now if you want to translate ال in such a way as to convey all the meanings mentioned above you will have to say 'Each and every, all and the.'

Then comesحمد. There is not a single word in English to convey its idea. 'Praise' is translation of مدح not حمد; Thanks' is translation of شكر not حمد. "Hamd" means "to praise and thank some one because he deserves to be praised whether he has done you any favour or not provided that his qualities are not given to him by someone else."

How can anybody convey this idea in translations?

Now comes (L) of الله It conveys the idea of 'For', 'Of, 'Belonging to' etc. No single English preposition can cover the whole range of its meanings. الله is generally rendered as 'God'. But, first of all 'god" is not translation of الله because الله means 'One who deserves to be loved' and 'Into whom every one seeks refuge.'

Secondly الله has no plural and no feminine. So this name itself reflects light upon the fact that He is one and only "one and that He has no partner nor any equal. But god' has plural (gods) and feminine (goddess).

This short explanation should be sufficient to show that it is impossible to translate the Qur'an in such a way that the translation conveys all the shades of meanings of the original,"

In the words of A. J. Arbury, the Quran is "a foreign idiom, for the Quran is God's revealation in Arabic, and the emotive and evocative qualities of the original disappear almost totally in the skilfullest translation." (The holy Quran, an introduction; London,1953).

It is clear, therefore, that no translation can replace this, divine literary work at all. Of course, a number of English translations of the Quran have been published; but it has always been felt that yet another effort for better translation is necessary, because all existing translations appear inadequate or carrying misleading meanings of certain verses. This feeling is not restricted to English translations; but it affects also those in other languages. Under the circumstances, should one make use of the defective translation and leave aside the perfect original, particularly when he is addressing the Almighty Allah?